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Exploring risk and protective factors for elder abuse in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Africa was considered a society that traditionally revered older people. However, research shows that elder abuse on the continent is a growing social and human rights problem. This study explored the nature of abuse experienced by older persons, the risk and protective factors for elder abuse and the gaps and strengths of services provided to older persons in peri-urban communities within Durban in KwaZulu-Natal and Cape Town in the Western Cape, South Africa. A descriptive, interpretive qualitative study was implemented as it offered the opportunity to explore older persons' and key informants' understanding of elder abuse. Convenience sampling was used to select 116 older persons to participate in six gender-disaggregated focus groups in the respective provinces. Thirty semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants from non-profit organisations and government departments. Data was analysed using inductive and deductive thematic analysis. The findings revealed that obstacles included socioeconomic factors, substance misuse and diminished traditional family values, whereas the protective factors included access to community networks, social support and awareness of rights. Suggestions are made for social workers to integrate developmental social welfare services in practice to enhance older persons' access to human rights and social justice.

KEY TERMS: developmental social work, elder abuse, older persons, protective factors, risk factors, South Africa.

KEY DATES: Submitted: March 2024; Reviewed: August 2024; Accepted: September 2024; Published: October 2024

KEY DECLARATIONS: Funding: None | Conflict of Interest: None

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Murugen C. S, Raniga T. & Glaser R. M. (2024). Exploring Risk and Protective Factors for Elder Abuse in South Africa. *African Journal of Social Work*, 14(4), 239-248. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ajsw.v14i5.2>

INTRODUCTION

It is widely accepted that older persons have played an active and invaluable role in sustaining families and contributing to economic growth, upholding human rights and social justice in society. In addition, older persons have been held in high esteem for their wisdom, indigenous knowledge, cultural traditions and practices, which add to South Africa's vibrant and diverse culture. However, older persons face contemporary challenges due to the erosion of the extended family system, which has traditionally been the safety net for older persons. Moreover, due to high levels of poverty and unemployment, children of older persons can no longer provide a safety net to their parents. Instead, there are indications that elder abuse is widely spread across the globe. In South Africa, older persons who reside in townships and informal settlements are most vulnerable to various types of abuse. This study aimed to understand the perceived risks and protective factors for elder abuse, which forms the central focus of this article using a qualitative descriptive research design. This paper highlights the current context of ageing in Africa, developmental social welfare, methodology, results and discussion. In the end, we offer implications for social work and conclusions.

BACKGROUND

The definition of ageing established by the 1982 United Nations World Assembly on Ageing in Vienna is that life begins to diminish at age 60; however, we have witnessed that many older persons remain active and contribute meaningfully to society. Globally, all regions are experiencing population ageing, and it is an irreversible trend that needs immediate attention (United Nations [UN], 2023). For instance, the number of people 65 years and older worldwide is projected to more than double, rising from 761 million in 2021 to 1.6 billion in 2050 (UN, 2023). People 80 or older are expected to triple between 2020 and 2050 to reach 426 million (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). While this shift in the distribution of a country's population ageing started in high-income countries where, in Japan, 30 per cent of the population is already over 60 years old, the trend has now shifted to low- and middle-income countries experiencing the greatest change (WHO, 2022). The report added that by 2050, two-thirds of the world's population over 60 will live in low- and middle-income countries, such as South Africa (WHO, 2022).

It has been reported that between 2020 and 2050, the older African population is projected to triple from 74.4 million to 235.1 million, and its growth in the next three decades will outpace that of any other region of the world (National Institutes on Ageing, 2020). South Africa has the highest number of older persons in Africa, with approximately 5.4 million people aged 60 and above (Statistics of South Africa, 2024b). Black Africans, 60 and above, remain the lowest rung in the social strata, with over 60 per cent of them having no formal education. Consequently, as a result of the apartheid system, the majority of older Black African females continue to live in poor rural areas where they are vulnerable to various types of abuses.

Context of study

Ikamva Labantu (Future of the People) is a community-led, non-profit organisation (NGO) operating at the grassroots to support 17 Older Person Clubs in Cape Town's townships with health and psychosocial services. Situated in the Western Cape (WC), it supports older persons who have been abused and educates them about their democratic and human rights. Tafta (The Association for the Aged) is an NGO that provides accommodation, including frail care, to older persons in 13 residential units and community-based psychosocial support services in Durban, KwaZulu Natal (KZN). Tafta operates a National Toll-free Elder Abuse Helpline to mitigate elder abuse in the country. Both civil society organisations provide developmental social work services to older persons who reside in rural, peri-urban and urban communities in Cape Town and Durban and who have been subject to multiple forms of abuse. Through the operation of their day service centres, older persons are encouraged to participate actively in their communities, and social workers provide micro, meso and macro intervention services. There has been a dearth of research conducted on elder abuse in South Africa (Statistics of South Africa, 2024b). To fill this empirical gap and to improve policy advocacy and developmental social work services to older persons, the two NGOs, in partnership with the University of Johannesburg, embarked on a qualitative study to explore the range of abuse suffered by older persons in KZN and WC in South Africa (SA). This article contributes to the body of knowledge in two ways: by providing a nuanced understanding of elder abuse across two provinces in SA from the perspectives of older persons and key informants; secondly, by encouraging academic debate about the significance of developmental social welfare practice to older persons.

Developmental social welfare in the context of this study

The South African Older Person's Act 13 of 2006 promotes the legal protection, empowerment, rights and security of older persons with the family and community as the primary care support systems. Post-1994, the development approach to social welfare as enshrined in the White Paper on Social Welfare (1997) has been regarded as the

appropriate model for ensuring active person-centred participation, rights-based approach and building partnerships to uphold democracy in the country (Gray & Lombard, 2023). Patel (2008) contends that redesigning a social welfare system has proven to be a complex process in South Africa, with increased unemployment and poverty rates. The country's most successful poverty alleviation strategy for older persons has been the expansive state old age pension with about 3.9 million beneficiaries (Steyn, 2024). Given the expansive old-age pension rollout, Raniga and Simpson (2011), and Patel (2015) question its fiscal sustainability and argue that because social development goals are intertwined with economic goals, one cannot evaluate the progress of development and ensure optimal health, income security and quality of life of older persons without examining shifts in economic policy. The five pillars of social development will be integrated into the presentation of the findings of this study, namely a rights-based approach, interrelations of social and economic development, role of state and civil society in service delivery, democracy and active participation of older persons in society (Patel, 2015).

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative descriptive, interpretive research design was adopted to explore the nature of abuse experienced by older persons, the risk and protective factors and the gaps and strengths of services provided to older persons in townships within Durban and peri-urban communities around Cape Town. The qualitative method was used to understand people's beliefs, experiences, attitudes, behaviour, and interactions, eventually giving vulnerable populations a voice (Erlingson & Brysiewicz, 2017). The study combined stakeholder engagement, focus group discussions involving older persons and semi-structured key informant interviews with service providers within the older person's sector as data collection sources. The selection of focus group participants was guided by convenience sampling. In KZN, the study was advertised in service centres in five communities: KwaMashu, Ntuzuma, Newlands, Wentworth and Clairwood. Ikamva Labantu advertised the study at its seventeen Older Person's Clubs by displaying posters. It was not a criterion of the sampling strategy for older persons to have had a lived experience of elder abuse. The focus groups were gender disaggregated to explore the gender differences in the experience of abuse more effectively. In KZN, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 stakeholders, while in the WC, 15 interviews were undertaken with 18 interviewees, three of which took place in pairs. Key informants from government departments and civil society organisations were identified during provincial stakeholder engagements held by the researchers.

The research assistants were matched by gender to the group, facilitating more open discussion from participants. The semi-structured interview guide was designed using the Availability, Accessibility, Acceptability and Quality Framework – AAAQ (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2019) to assess the gaps and strengths of services rendered to older persons by community and government organisations. Data saturation was reached in both data sets (Erlingson & Brysiewicz, 2017).

Member checks were undertaken by sharing the report with key informants and the focus group members to verify the findings. The findings were shared with the Ikamva Labantu older person's leadership forum in WC. Feedback was received via e-mail and in person. The study findings were disseminated through presentations and postings on stakeholder websites such as the South African Older Persons Forum and local media coverage. The study received ethical clearance from the University of Johannesburg Research Ethics Committee (REC-01-324-2023). Consent forms outlined the study's adherence to principles of confidentiality, autonomy and protection of privacy.

Profile of older persons in focus groups

As depicted in Table 1, all the participants in the focus groups were older persons (over 60 years old) living in peri-urban, under-resourced communities, often called townships. The majority (64%) of participants in KZN spoke either English or isiZulu and in the WC, the dominant language was isiXhosa (100%).

Table 1: Demographic profile of older persons in focus groups

| Community | Province | Male | Female |
|------------------------|------------|-----------|-----------|
| Clairwood | KZN | 6 | 0 |
| KwaMashu | KZN | 6 | 14 |
| Newlands | KZN | 0 | 6 |
| Ntuzuma | KZN | 0 | 11 |
| Wentworth | KZN | 7 | 0 |
| Khayelitsha | WC | 18 | 34 |
| Gugulethu | WC | 6 | 0 |
| New Crossroads | WC | 3 | 1 |
| Nyanga | WC | 1 | 0 |
| Phillipi | WC | 3 | 0 |
| Total | | 50 | 66 |
| Total in sample | 116 | | |

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This article discusses three risk factors and two protective factors for elder abuse in SA, which were identified by the participants in this study.

Risk factors

An understanding of the risk factors for elder abuse could assist in the design of effective developmental social work interventions to prevent and manage elder abuse (Pillemer, Burnes, Riffin, & Lachs, 2016). This study applied the micro-macro divide embedded in developmental social welfare to identify risks utilising the individual, relationship and community/societal levels (Schiemberg & Ganz, 1999).

In a country where the majority of people experienced systematic disenfranchisement through apartheid, the exclusion from meaningful democratic participation in the economy affected the quality of life of older persons in SA. The apartheid legacy is a key factor leading to the dire poverty experienced by older persons in contemporary South Africa. According to a 2014/2015 World Bank survey, approximately 55.5 per cent of the population was living below the national upper-bound poverty line (R992) in 2015 (World Bank, 2020).

The focus group participants added that the migration of their adult children from rural areas to find jobs in the cities contributed to the breakdown of the family support system and reduced economic support for older persons (Alexander, 2023). Many of the participants commented that such changes in family structures resulted in an erosion of respect towards elders. The loss of traditional African values such as ubuntu, which ensures respect and dignity showered on elders, has been impacted by 'modern' values involving a value shift from collectivism to individualism (Agunbiade, 2019).

Socio-economic factors and financial abuse

South Africa is beset with high unemployment rates, economic decline, and escalating fuel, food and utilities costs. Consequently, families struggle to survive financially. The high rate of unemployment places great financial strain on families and results in social problems such as substance abuse, criminal activity and psychological or physically aggressive behaviour displayed through elder abuse and other forms of family violence. As recipients of the old age grant (OAG), older persons are often dependent on their family members for financial support. In some households, this may be a mutually agreed and beneficial arrangement. However, this study found that in many homes, children or grandchildren forcibly take control of the older person's OAG, primarily for their own use. Often, only a minimal part of the pension is used for the older person's needs, sometimes leaving them with insufficient food and medication to meet their needs.

Especially when it is time to take their medication, and they do not have something to eat, and you have to have something to eat before you take your medication (Older Female Participant, Newlands).

The seizing of the OAG by adult children or grandchildren may also result in physical abuse in some households.

Granny asked her son about the food as there was none in the house, and he was the one who kept her bank card. She asked for a bank statement, which he refused to give her. She then asked for her bank card back. That is when the trouble started; he punched her to the ground, and she had to be saved by the neighbour (Older Female Participant, KwaMashu).

Children are unemployed. They steal the food and sell it to buy drugs (Protection Services, Interview Participant).

When you get your elderly grant, they want this money. There is no peace in this house. They want this money, and everything depends on you. Everyone comes back from wherever, once you get paid, wanting this money - unless you hide it. It is painful for us, my child; it is better now that we are here (Ikamva Labantu's Older Person's Club (Older Female Participant, Khayelitsha).

The unemployment rate in South Africa was at the national average of 32.9% in the first quarter of 2024 (Statistics South Africa, 2024a). Most South Africans are compelled to leave their homes in rural communities to seek employment in the cities. Financial constraints of older persons lead to the risk of abuse, and victims of abuse find it difficult to access services to ask for help. Transport costs to get to a police station or the social worker are considered too high when compared to feeding themselves and their families.

Taxi fares, even to go to the police in a community, are high; it is impossible to walk there. In rural areas, facilities are far apart (Interview Participant Social Care Sector).

Due to the high level of unemployment and limited resources, many people living in townships are forced to live in multigenerational households. Although some older persons reported that this family arrangement ensures their protection from abusers, several other respondents saw this living arrangement as a risk for elder abuse, partly due to financial competition for resources in the household. The risks are exacerbated when the perpetrator is a substance user as their financial desperation is higher, and this results in drug-induced violent behaviour. This theme is explored further in the discussion below.

Substance misuse

Substance misuse was the most frequently cited risk factor for elder abuse in both KZN and WC. The findings of this study corroborate a scoping review of 198 studies conducted by Story (2020), who found that substance misuse was the key predictor of elder abuse and that older people are especially vulnerable when caretakers are misusing substances. Many of the participants associated substance misuse with high levels of poverty and unemployment. In the WC, the use of Tik (methamphetamine) and alcohol was associated with the risk of violence against older people. Older persons consistently expressed that such abuse inflicted great emotional pain on them.

I am very emotionally abused by a child who is my grandson, who smokes tik [methamphetamine] When he is high. Everyone in the house can feel it. Sometimes I do not even know where to hide myself (Older Female Participant, Khayelitsha).

There is this one (son), who is the old one - When he smokes (hookah pipe), he does as he pleases in the house. He stays in the backyard but will come into the house at midnight looking for food. If I talk to him, you can see that he wants to beat me and even tell me that this is not my house but his mother's house (Older Male Participant, Khayelitsha).

In KZN, addiction to alcohol or drugs, particularly Whoonga (low-grade heroin), was a key driver of financial, emotional and physical abuse. Similar to the WC, the affinity for alcohol and drugs is related to unemployment and structural poverty. A pattern was noted across the target communities in this study, where adult children go out with friends, consume alcohol until they are inebriated, and upon returning home, demand food from the older person. If there was no food in the home due to financial constraints, or the older person was in bed, the perpetrator would become verbally abusive or physically aggressive. This clearly violates the human rights and democratic participation of older persons in society.

He is abusing us like this. When he smokes and sleeps, then wakes up, he demands food. If he does not find food, he becomes violent, and he beats anything and anyone who is in front of him. Sometimes, you could see that he would even kill someone or break something. That is how he is abusing me (Older Female Participant, Khayelitsha).

In the WC, there was a concern about the lack of government-funded facilities to address substance abuse. In cases where they do exist, they were reportedly ineffective in rehabilitating the perpetrator, who often returned home to continue abusing the victim. Substance misuse also potentially exacerbates the economic hardship of older people, as participants reported that children take household goods to sell for drugs and alcohol. Pillemer et al. (2016) note that the isolation of both older persons who are victims and perpetrators, along with a lack of justice and social support, are significant risk factors for elder abuse.

Diminished traditional family values

Traditionally, in African families, children care for the older generation (South Africa Human Rights Commission [SAHRC], 2015). The erosion of respect that adult children and grandchildren have for the older generation is not consistent with this tradition and is considered to be a contributor to elder abuse. Participants reflected on the disempowerment of parents, including the historical right to enforce discipline in the home.

Let us be honest; the root cause is sparing the rod. It is easy for a child to open a case because I have disciplined him. We did not do those things. Nowadays, the parent has to apologise as if he is the culprit. No matter when the child comes home, whether at 1 or 2 am. Open the door and keep quiet. If you say something, you will be in trouble (Older Male Participant, Khayelitsha).

Up until now, my children cannot even look at me as their parent... The firstborn and the second born both have a degree; they are not struggling with anything (Crying). One thing I know is that when they come, I must give them money because I am the father. It is very painful (Older Male Participant, Khayelitsha).

Older persons experience feelings of abandonment when adult children move out to establish their own nuclear families. Those living in the townships believe that this diminishes family support, putting older people at risk.

Living by oneself is very risky as I am also living alone, and that is why it is an issue when our children are given RDP homes by the government, so they move out of the yard instead of building within it and safeguarding the family. Just as you expect your kids to care for you, they move out into their own homes (Older Male Participant, KwaMashu).

The move from living as an extended family to a nuclear family is seen as hindering the opportunity for older persons to impart knowledge and instil traditional values in their adult children. Many older African adults believe these changes in the social fabric are detrimental to their emotional well-being.

This affects our culture and traditions; it makes it difficult to impart knowledge and live in a way that is true to us; hence, things are getting out of hand. Our traditional and cultural norms are becoming obsolete (Older Male Participant, KwaMashu).

The erosion of traditional respect and support for older persons in African society was considered to amplify their age-related vulnerabilities, such as frailty and dementia. This issue is compounded by the perceived inadequacy of social protection provided by the government. Although Act 13 of 2006 promotes the protection of older people, the study revealed that shrinking budgets and poor implementation of developmental social welfare services by government social workers intensify the effects of poverty by limiting older people's agency and access to resources.

The findings are consistent with research in sub-Saharan Africa, which reveals that 'modernisation' has led to the breakdown of traditional African values and of honouring and respecting elders (Agunbiade, 2019). The loss of traditional African values is associated with over-reliance on material success, migration, urbanisation and the disintegration of the family. These changes have led to a breakdown of 'social control', the way norms and values regulate social behaviour (Keikelame & Ferreira, 2000), a loss of social cohesiveness (Wamara, 2022) and older persons being perceived as a burden to the family system (Aboderin & Ferreira, 2009).

Protective factors Awareness of rights

In South Africa, the rights of older persons are protected by the Constitution, including its Bill of Rights, Act 13 of 2006, the Domestic Violence Act 116 of 1998, and national instructions of the South African Police Service, which detail how cases of elder abuse should be managed.

The findings indicated that there is strong agreement that older people's awareness of their rights and their ability to recognise signs of abuse is protective against abuse. The rights-based approach is a key pillar of developmental social welfare practice, and social workers at both organisations emphasise educating older persons on their rights at the clubs/service centres and through government protection and social services. Furthermore, considering that welfare pluralism is embedded in the developmental social welfare approach, the participants perceived the partnerships between government, civil society organisations and legal clinics as crucial in ensuring older peoples' protection and access to property rights. However, it should be noted that some of the older persons who did not receive services from clubs/service centres due to being homebound and immobile were marginalised and unable to attend government-led rights-based campaigns. Consequently, key informants from both NGOs commented that most older people are not sufficiently aware of their rights and that developmental social work interventions specifically aimed at raising awareness about elder abuse should be increased, especially among younger people.

Awareness of abuse and what behaviour constitutes elder abuse helps to protect older persons from being abused (Interview respondent, Social Service).

I would say that what can help older persons is to educate those who are not here (about elder abuse and older people's rights), make pamphlets available for them and also there must be people available to do awareness campaigns. (Older Male Participant, Khayelitsha).

While members of protection services are supposed to be knowledgeable about these rights, there is a perception that many are not well acquainted with the legislation. In Uganda, much prominence is given by social workers to democratic participation and awareness of rights and rights education as key protection factors (Mussie et al., 2022).

Access to community networks

Access to community networks that provide social and practical support was considered an important protective factor against elder abuse. The value of local community social capital, in the form of friends and neighbours, and formal government structures was acknowledged. Structured community networks such as older person's clubs/service centres facilitate the development of social networks, which are imperative in protecting participants from abuse. These structures provide an avenue for identifying and reporting abuse. Social workers are able to provide micro-individual and family counselling services and macro-advocacy programmes. However, some respondents noted that clubs/service centres only provide temporary and ad hoc support from abuse:

They are protected at clubs, but when they get home, the room is plundered. Some do not come to clubs to protect their belongings (Interview participant, Civil Society).

Community-driven leadership forums dedicated to the protection of older people, such as those of older person's clubs/service centres, play a role in identifying and reporting abuse:

I can go to your house on the day of payday and say, 'We are going to get our pay today. Where is your pay card?' Then I will tell you that your children are taking your money. Then I will help you buy groceries. Then I will take the money left and tell you that I will keep it for you (An older female participant, Khayelitsha).

At a meso level, local street communities, community forums and neighbourhood watches were considered protective systems to identify elder abuse and are good structures for resolving family disputes. In the post-apartheid era, street committees comprising community residents of a particular street have been established to ensure protection, safety and security in townships, being organised under the South African National Civics Organisation (SANCO) (Drivdal, 2016).

Another thing that I see helpful in my area - if you have a problem, you take it up to the street committee. You must stand up as a grandma and go to the street committee. The street committee, if you call them, they even come to your house, sit down with you, and discuss the matter. That is the other thing that's helping us (Older female participant, Khayelitsha).

In implementing developmental social welfare services, community forums that form a network of support that includes the older population in the townships are perceived as important macro services.

In my community - everything starts in the community. We have community committees. If there is a problem, the committee discusses it. Then they take it to the general meeting so that the general meeting can comment. The committee can also take the matter up to the police (Older Female Participant, Khayelitsha).

Many of the participants also perceived that attending church is an important structure to address abuse through talking to the pastor. Social workers need to take heed of the importance of implementing therapeutic support groups with caregivers who are caring for older persons with physical or mental frailty, as the number of support groups is very limited in communities.

Pillemer et al. (2016) highlight the importance of advocacy and community engagement in mitigating elder abuse and that social capital is crucial for protecting older persons in society. Developmental social welfare activities encouraging access to support and a safe platform to discuss experiences have been identified as best practices for empowering older adults in Canada (Hirst et al., 2016).

IMPLICATIONS

Gerontology primarily addresses developmental ageing challenges and promotes independence, autonomy and dignity in later life. In addressing the scourge of elder abuse, social workers in South Africa need to employ a developmental social work approach which encompasses multi-level intervention strategies ranging from psychosocial and economic support to advocacy and building strong partnerships between government and civil society organisations. This is needed to tackle structural poverty and substance misuse as key risk factors for elder abuse in contemporary society. Social workers must address the need for capacity building of personnel in health, justice and protection services about the needs of older persons and elder abuse. Public awareness campaigns on the rights of older persons, types of elder abuse and strategies for preventing abuse should be prioritised. It is important that social workers facilitate programmes to encourage older persons' active engagement in society and access to networks and strategies that enable older persons to remain economically active. Mahler (2023) maintains that the government must facilitate caregiver support programmes such as monthly support groups, training of home-based care workers and establishing safe houses to strengthen the protection of older persons and reduce the increasing number of elder abuse cases.

CONCLUSION

This article examined the key risk and protective factors for elder abuse in South Africa. It highlights structural and socio-political determinants such as the economic and political marginalisation of older persons, which led to limited economic opportunities, education and skills development. Consequently, social development challenges such as poverty, substance misuse and changing cultural values are contributing factors that have exacerbated emotional, financial, physical, sexual and systemic abuse of older persons in the past decade. Developmental social work is instrumental in stimulating social and economic development, strengthening the partnership between state and civil society in service delivery, and promoting the active participation of older persons in society. People-centered democracy and participation in upholding human rights and social justice of older persons is an ethical obligation of social workers and all stakeholders in the social development sector.

Declarations

There was no conflict of interest in this study. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Johannesburg. This study received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors and is the original work of the co-authors. This work will not be submitted to another publication unless rejected or withdrawn. This Journal holds the sole and exclusive right to publish the work for the full length of the copyright period. Permission for reproduced work must be indicated. All co-authors contributed to the writing of this article.

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